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INTRODUCTION

Painting isn't the end of everything. Nor is it a luxury — a servant to wait on us. Through paintings we come to value our sixty years or so of life more highly, come to hate that which confines or destroys life more fiercely. That is the justification of painting, and that is why when I say that Martin Bloch was a true painter it means much more than that he was a man who could apply paint in such a way as to delight the eye. 'By beauty,' wrote Gorki, 'we mean that combination of materials which endows whatever man, the master, has made with a form acting on the feelings and reason as a force stimulating in people wonder, pride and joy in their own ability to create.'

Many modern works lack beauty because instead of stimulating such emotions in people they do the opposite — they provoke despair and a feeling of lonely helplessness. It is perhaps because of the prevailing fashion for this sort of work that Martin Bloch's paintings are nothing like as well known as they deserve to be. But this of course is not to imply that Bloch's work is based on an inane kind of optimism. As a refugee and — in this country until recently when the Tate acquired one of his paintings — a neglected, underestimated artist, he must have often been subject to a sense of lonely helplessness. The point is that he worked to disperse such a feeling, not to exploit it. His paintings are tender, compassionate, marvelling, poignant.

Maybe such words sound strange when applied to canvases that are mostly just of fields, trees, bridges, hills, chimneys. But then a painter is constantly like a blind man who has just gained his sight; everything is connected just because it is suddenly seen to belong to the visual world: the moon, a telephone box and a girl coming out of school all celebrate the same thing — the ability of man to see, and through the medium of sight to feel and to reason. On countless afternoons Bloch looks down on Bangor. He sounds the depth of the valley bed beneath him. He becomes

proud of the narrow passage between the houses, the alley through which he can see further, as if he had prised it open himself. He climbs the hills opposite, wading through the shadows that are still shallow. And gradually — for he worked very slowly — he constructs strongly and makes impregnable his first intuitive sudden light-reasoned discoveries. He establishes, for instance, that in the late afternoon when grains of sand or corn or brick or locks of hair are, having burnt in the light all day, at their most resplendent before being slaked by the dark, that at this moment a child standing still in a red dress appears to be made of the same substance as the red brick houses. This is a poetic idea expressed visually: it has been expressed in a literary way by Jon Silkin:

‘I have seen stones: I have seen brick

But this house was made of neither brick nor stone

But a house of flesh and blood.’

The vehicle for Bloch’s poetic imagination was light. Not light considered exclusively as the Impressionists considered it — so that light in their pictures becomes their subject-matter; but light considered as an illumination of a particular moment in the daily history of a particular subject. James Joyce has spoken, as a writer, of the moment of epiphany — the moment when a character by some action or reaction reveals himself fully. I think Bloch waited for such moments in the visual scheme of things, in which light is the agent of the revelation. Look at his self-portrait. He is as on the ready as a man who knows he will only have one chance to flick the shutter of his camera at the exact, right moment.

But of course Bloch was not a photographer, he was a painter, and so the job was longer, more complex and far more problematic. He did not, in my opinion, consistently succeed until the last ten years of his life. (Though in our publicity din of superlatives one should perhaps point out that to succeed consistently in any art, even if only for ten years, is as rare as true love.) First he had to learn to ride wild colour — many painters only use colour that has already been harnessed — and this he learnt forty years ago in Spain, helped by the example of Matisse. Then he began to use colour to express atmosphere: to create a kind of transparent

gauze of colour through which one sees the given scene, and which establishes the mood of the picture. It was in Italy that he first began to use colour to describe how light fills space, how an object displaces light as it can displace water, and how, as a result of this displacement, the light breaks on certain edges of the object like surf. And for this task of charting space he looked to the greatest of modern pilots — Cézanne.

What I have called, after Joyce, the moment of epiphany, I don't think Bloch discovered until he came to England, where such moments are the unique feature of our constantly changing weather and light. Now he has arrived to beat most English painters on their own ground. His mastery of wild colour, his understanding of how colour can govern atmosphere, his awareness of how space cups light in its circular nature — all these must be used to express his new vision. But there still remains the job of painting these late and most truthful canvases. If Bloch had only wanted to paint a momentary effect — that would have been comparatively easy. But if he wants to paint a moment of visual revelation, then he must begin far back, slowly building the landscape into his canvas until his final brush-strokes — that were always the most dramatic ones — complete the canvas with the same sudden authority with which the actual moment of epiphany reveals the character of the actual landscape.

Look again at the trees, moors, copses, valleys, in these late canvases. They are works of love. Their last garment has been removed. They are revealed, radiant, and all that remains of mystery is our own surprising and tender sense of it.

JOHN BERGER

CHRONOLOGY

- 1883 Born 16th November at Neisse, Silesia
- 1897 Studies the violin, and makes first drawings in the foothills of the Sudeten Mountains
- 1902 Studies architecture in Berlin
- 1904 Visit to Florence. Decides to become a painter despite parental opposition
- 1905 Studies in Munich
- 1907 Returns to Berlin
Studies aesthetics with Heinrich Wölfflin, and drawing with Lovis Corinth
- 1911 First one-man exhibition at the Paul Cassirer Gallery, Berlin
- 1912 Works in Montparnasse. Close friendship with Jules Pascin
- 1913 Second one-man exhibition at the Paul Cassirer Gallery, Berlin. First journey to Spain with Pascin
- 1914 Visits Berlin
Second journey to Spain with Helmut Ruhemann. Stranded there by the war
- 1915 Lives in Malaga and Cordova with Marie Laurencin and her husband, Otto von Waetjen
- 1920 Large retrospective exhibition of fifty-four paintings at the Paul Cassirer Gallery, Berlin. Marries Lotte Zavřel
- 1922 Third visit to Spain. Birth of his daughter Barbara
- 1923 Opens the Bloch-Kerschbaumer School, Berlin, with Anton Kerschbaumer
- 1924 Begins to paint each summer in Italy, particularly at Lago di Garda
- 1926 Kerschbaumer dies, and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff takes his place with Bloch at the school
- 1934 To escape the Nazis, flees to Denmark. Arrives in England and opens his school of contemporary painting in London with Roy de Maistre

- 1935 Paints in Denmark accompanied by pupils
1939 One-man exhibition at Alex Reid and Lefevre, London
1940 Interned first at Huyton, Lancs. and then in the Isle of Man
1941 Paints in London. Exhibits 114 drawings at Oxford and Cambridge
1945 Begins painting in Dorset
1947 Becomes a British subject. Begins painting in Wales
1948 Journey to America. Teaches and exhibits at Minneapolis
Paints in Colorado and New Mexico. Exhibits at Princeton, New Jersey (*The Mississippi at Minneapolis* bought by the Tate Gallery, 1954)
1949 Joint exhibition with Josef Herman at the Ben Uri Gallery, London. Guest teacher at Camberwell School of Art, London
1951 Contributor to the Arts Council's exhibition '60 Paintings for '51' with *Down from Bethesda Quarry*, bought by the Contemporary Art Society
1952 Travelling exhibition in Canada
1953 Ill in St Mary Abbot's Hospital, London. Painting of hospital ward now in National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
1954 Dies on 19th June in London

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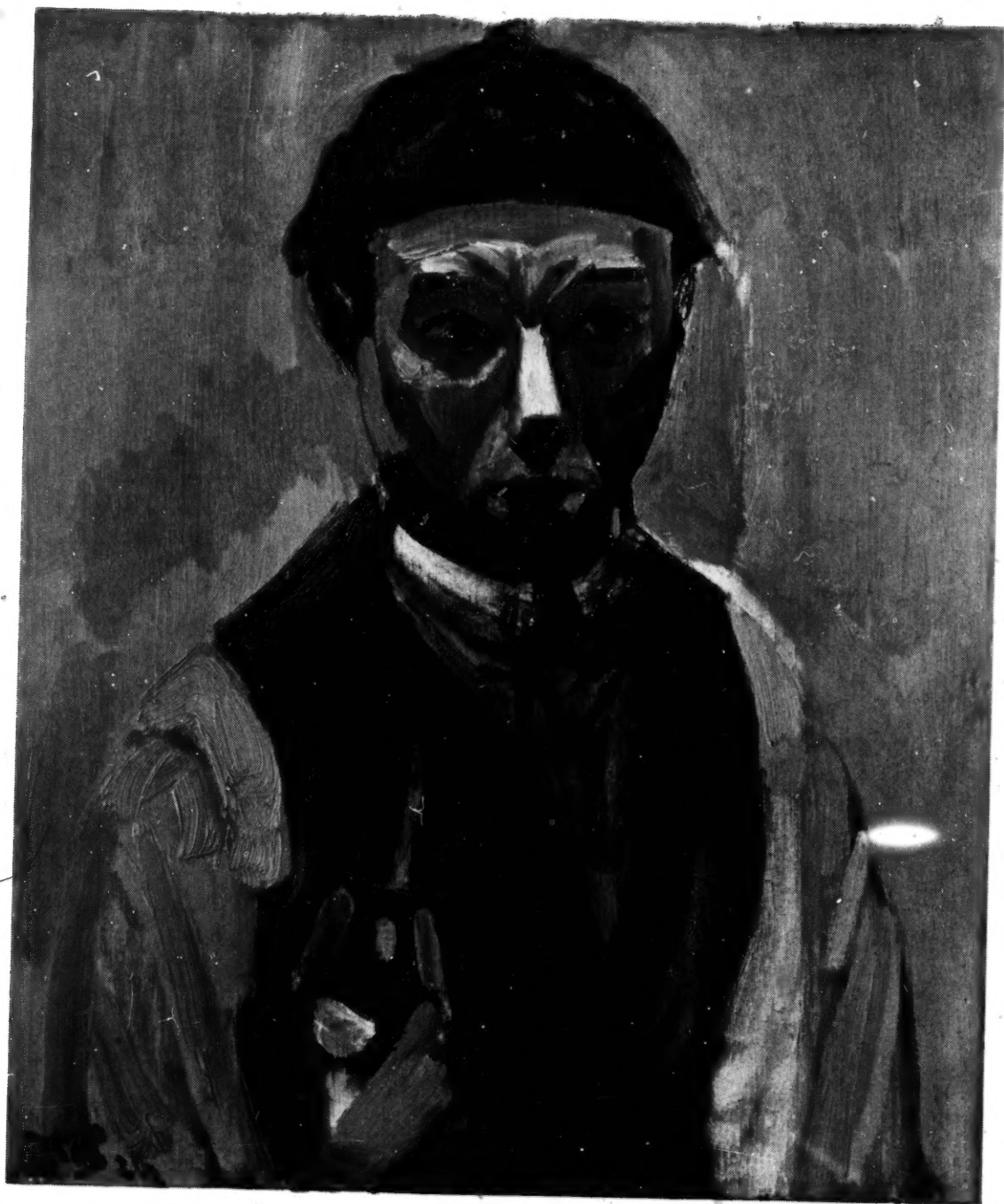


Plate I Self Portrait with Pipe (No 8)

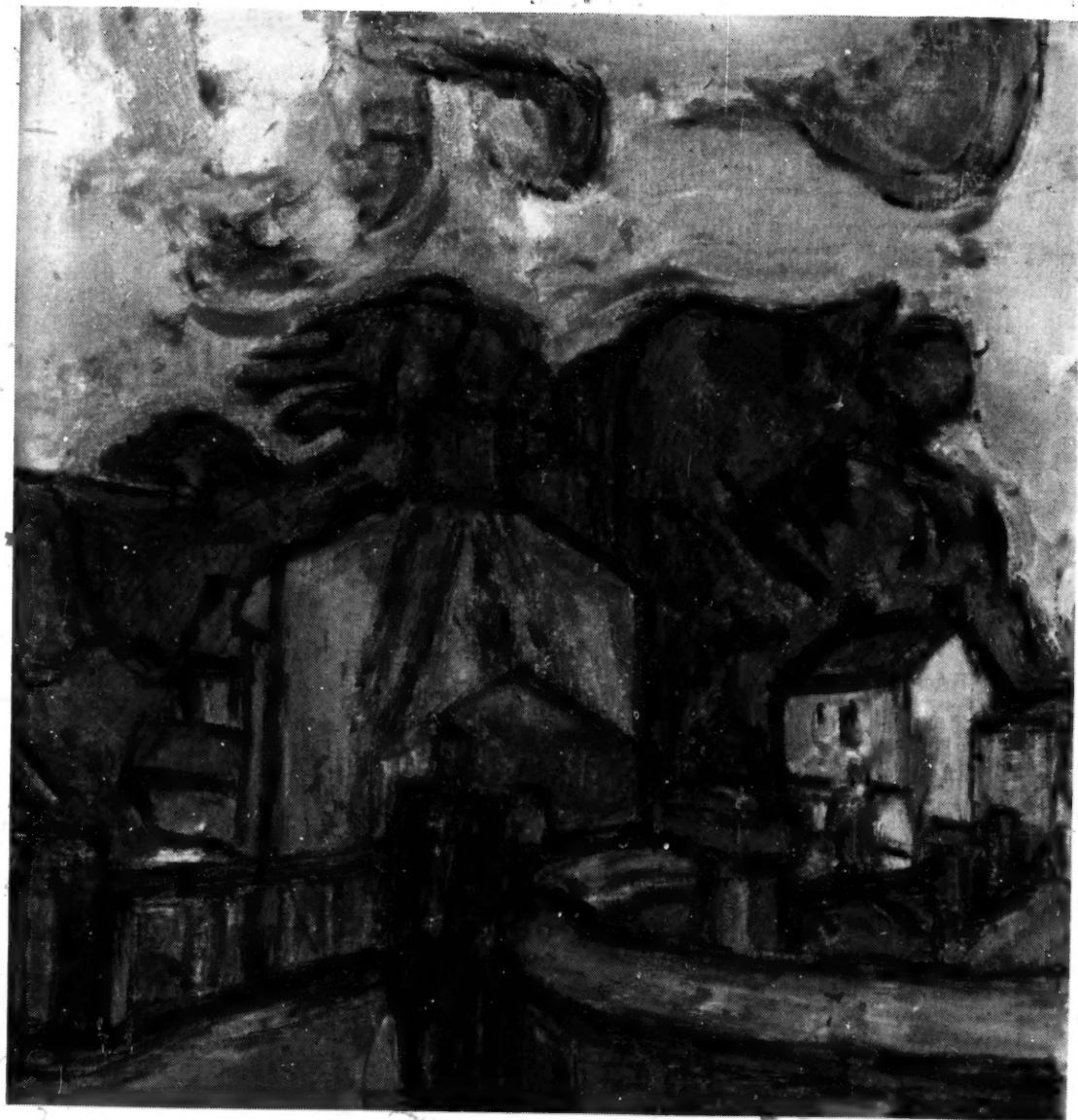


Plate IV Welsh Village (No 44)

PAINTINGS

*All the paintings are in oil on canvas unless otherwise indicated.
Measurements are given in inches, height before width.*

- 1 BASQUE WASHER WOMEN 1914-15
 $52\frac{1}{2} \times 30\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by the South London Gallery, Camberwell
- 2 GARDEN IN MALAGA 1917
 37×24
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 3 BASQUE COUNTRY 1918
 $23\frac{1}{2} \times 40\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by Mr H. Weinberger
- 4 STILL-LIFE, YELLOW GROUND 1921
 $32 \times 45\frac{7}{8}$
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 5 STUDIO CORNER 1923
Oil on paper on canvas, $29\frac{3}{4} \times 36\frac{1}{4}$
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 6 TORBOLE HARBOUR 1924
 29×36
Lent by Mrs B. Rossiter
- 7 OLIVE GROVE 1926
 $39\frac{3}{8} \times 31\frac{3}{4}$
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 8 SELF PORTRAIT WITH PIPE 1926 Plate I
 34×20
Lent by Mrs D. M. Halsey
- 9 STILL-LIFE — PLANT AND BRUSHES 1928
 $23\frac{3}{4} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by Mr Helmut Ruhemann

- 10 STILL-LIFE WITH FRENCH JUGS 1929
26 × 32
Lent by Mr Howard Rigney
- 11 WOMAN ON A TERRACE, ITALY 1930
39½ × 32
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 12 SCUOLA DI SAN ROCCO, VENICE 1930
29 × 36
Lent by Mrs B. Rossiter
- 13 VILLAGE ON A CANAL 1933
28½ × 36½
Lent by Mr F. Mendel, Saskatoon
- 14 THISTLES AND CROCUS 1933
30 × 35
Lent by the City Art Gallery, Leeds
- 15 KURFUERSTENDAM, BERLIN 1933
32 × 39½
Lent by the City Art Gallery, Leeds
- 16 SVENDBORG HARBOUR, DENMARK 1934 *Plate II*
27½ × 31½
Lent by the Ben Uri Art Gallery
- 17 HOUSE WITH FIGUREHEADS, MILLBANK 1936
24 × 36
Lent by Mrs Catriona Herman
- 18 STREET IN SVENDBORG, DENMARK 1936
21½ × 26
Lent by Mr L. B. Koppel
- 19 FOUR HEADS 1938
25½ × 39
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 20 STILL-LIFE WITH BANANAS 1938
20 × 27
Lent by Mrs L. M. Kadleigh

- 21 THE RED LION, BARNES 1939
25 × 34
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 22 DRAPERIES 1939
34 × 44½
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 23 HOUSE IN NORMANDY 'VARANGEVILLE' 1939-43
25½ × 32½
Lent by Mr Alexander Margulies
- 24 MIRACLE IN THE INTERNMENT CAMP 1940
26½ × 30
Lent by Dr Rowena Woolf
- 25 LABURNAM AND MAY TREES 1941
21 × 32
Lent by Leicester Museums and Art Gallery
- 26 AFRICAN MASK 1941
19½ × 24
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 27 FOG IN MAYFAIR MEWS 1943
20 × 20
Lent by the Contemporary Art Society for Wales
- 28 CHERUB'S HEAD 1943
16 × 20
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 29 BACK GARDEN IN HAMPSTEAD 1943
28½ × 28½
Lent by Sir Philip Hendy
- 30 KENSINGTON ROOFS AFTER FIRE-RAID 1944
28 × 36
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 31 DUSK IN WARTIME LONDON 1944
25 × 30
Lent by Miss D. A. Hassells-Yates

- 32 WOODLAND SCENE 1944
 $16\frac{1}{2} \times 28$
Lent by Mr C. S. Davis
- 33 THE GRIP OF THE BRANCHES 1945 *Plate III*
 $28 \times 36\frac{1}{2}$
Lent by Professor C. F. Powell
- 34 BLACKMORE VALE AGAINST THE SUN 1946
 20×24
Lent by Dr John Allison
- 35 DORSET LANDSCAPE 1944?
 25×30
Lent by Mr H. Kaufman
- 36 GOLDHILL, SHAFTESBURY 1947
 29×23
Lent by Mr F. Mendel, Saskatoon
- 37 BANGOR AT NIGHTFALL 1948
Lent by Mr John Anker, Oslo
 $26\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2}$
- 38 FROM COLORADO TO NEW MEXICO 1948-50
 20×28
Lent by Mr Cyril Frankel
- 39 NEW MEXICO RANCH 1948-50
 26×32
Lent by Mr Howard Rigney
- 40 BACK FROM THE QUARRY, WALES 1950
 36×29
Arts Council Collection
- 41 AFTERNOON IN BANGOR 1952-54
 50×36
Lent by Mrs Bloch
- 42 THE ESTUARY OF THE RIVER DEE 1953
 24×32
Lent by Mr Stephen Andrews

- 43 THE WOMB OF THE LAND 1954

20 × 30

Lent by Mr Cyril Frankel

- 44 WELSH VILLAGE 1954 *Plate IV*

26½ × 25½

Arts Council Collection (Welsh Committee)

DRAWINGS

All drawings are lent by Mrs Bloch except where otherwise stated.

- 45 OLIVE TREE 1925

Black chalk 18½ × 15½

- 46 RECLINING NUDE 1934

Black chalk 24½ × 26½

- 47 GIRL IN AN ARMCHAIR 1935

Black chalk 17½ × 13½

- 48 NUDE, BACK VIEW 1938

Black chalk 10½ × 8½

- 49 RECLINING NUDE 1940

Black and red chalk 10½ × 14½

Lent by Mr Cyril Frankel

- 50 INTERNMENT CAMP, HUYTON 1940

Black and red chalk heightened with white 22 × 28½

- 51 SEASCAPE FROM INTERNMENT CAMP 1940

Black chalk heightened with white 17½ × 16½

- 52 FLOWERS 1941

Pastel 26½ × 22½

- 53 FLOWERS AT NIGHT 1942

Black chalk 15½ × 20½

- 54 STANDING NUDE 1943
Black chalk 26×20
- 55 A JEWISH GIRL 1945
Black chalk $19 \times 15\frac{1}{4}$
- 56 AVENUE OF TREES 1946
Black and red chalk $10 \times 7\frac{3}{8}$
- 57 CYCLAMEN 1947
Brown and black chalk heightened with white $21\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$
- 58 TREES 1947
Black chalk $7\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{5}{8}$
Lent by Mr Cyril Frankel
- 59 LATE EVENING, NEW MEXICO 1948
Pen and black and red chalk $10 \times 13\frac{5}{8}$
- 60 DRAWING OF STEPHEN ANDREWS 1950
Black and red chalk $18\frac{7}{8} \times 12\frac{1}{4}$
Lent by Mr Stephen Andrews
- 61 STANDING NUDE 1953
Black chalk $14\frac{1}{2} \times 9$
- 62 THE WOMB OF THE LAND 1953
Pencil and black chalk $7 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$
The drawing for the painting No. 43
Lent by Mr Stephen Andrews
- 63 STANDING NUDE; BACK VIEW 1954
Black and red chalk $9\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$
Lent by Mr Cyril Frankel